

Perceptions of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in Ontario Universities

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Abstract

This article presents the results of the first phase of a research project on perceptions of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) in Canadian universities. Establishing explicit university recognition policies for IBDP students has been an ongoing task for the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), which conducted two studies on university perceptions of the IBDP in the UK (2003) and Australia/New Zealand (2007). The present study replicates these studies in the Canadian context, to discover how admissions officers in Ontario universities perceive the IBDP in relation to other curricula. Preliminary results reveal a high degree of uniformity in responses, consistent with the previous studies. The IBO is indicated as being the primary source of information, suggesting that it plays an important part in forming perceptions of the IBDP.

Keywords: International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, IBDP, university recognition, admissions officer perception, comparative education, international education

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats de la première phase d'un projet de recherche sur la perception du Programme du diplôme de l'IB (PDIB) dans les universités canadiennes. Établir des politiques de reconnaissance universitaire explicites pour les étudiants inscrits dans ce programme demeure une tâche permanente de l'Organisation du Baccalauréat International (IBO), qui a mené deux études sur les perceptions qu'ont les universités du PDIB au Royaume-Uni (2003) et en Australie / Nouvelle-Zélande (2007). La présente étude reprend ces travaux dans le contexte canadien afin de découvrir comment les responsables des admissions dans les universités de l'Ontario perçoivent le PDIB par rapport aux autres programmes. Les résultats préliminaires révèlent un degré élevé d'uniformité dans les réponses, en accord avec les études antérieures. L'IBO est répertorié comme la principale source d'information, ce qui suggère qu'il joue un rôle important dans la formation des perceptions du PDIB.

Mots-clés : Programme du diplôme du baccalauréat international (PDIB), reconnaissance par les universités, perception des responsables des admissions, éducation comparée, éducation internationale

Introduction

College-admissions officers at many schools say that...IB [has] acquired the status of [a] backstage pass at a rock concert. Selective universities begin to ask questions if they see that applicants have not taken the tests available at their high school. (Mathews, 2003, quoted in IBO 2007a, pp. 4–5)

The recent growth of the International Baccalaureate Organization's (IBO) International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP)¹ as an alternate curriculum within national (publicly funded) schools in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is well documented (e.g., Bagnall, 1994, 2010; Bunnell, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Daly, 2012; Doherty, 2009; Paris, 2003; Tarc & Beatty, 2012; Whitehead, 2005). Also well documented is the scarcity of empirical research supporting the IBO's claims regarding IBDP curricular outcomes (e.g., Hanover Research, 2010; Tarver, 2010; Tarc & Beatty, 2012). Panich (2001) remarked on the absence of any empirical evidence to support the claims made by the IBO with respect to the IBDP as a preferred vehicle for university preparation:

The kudos for the I.B. Programme and its graduates are abundant and readily forthcoming from anyone who is familiar with the program. However, scholarly empirical validation for the success of its graduates is surprisingly scant. This is paradoxical for a program whose curriculum involves the generation of a research-based paper, the Extended Essay, by every graduating student. It is also an anomaly considering that statistical validation was an area of concern from the earliest days of the organization. (pp. 18–19)

Although studies have been done on particular aspects of IBO programs in the past, and are now appearing with increasing frequency, "there may be concerns about the biases of existing studies because of frequent ties to the IBO itself" (Hanover Research, 2010, p. 11).

1 The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program is referred to inconsistently in the literature as "IBDP," "DP," "IB," "IBD," or "IB DP." Here, the diploma program is referred to as "IBDP," except in quotations which have other usage; "IB" is used to refer to the IBO's whole system of education.

The success of the IBDP depends on its acceptance as a suitable qualification for university admission. In fact, the impetus for the creation of the IBDP was a need “to develop for international schools a common curriculum and examination programme which would facilitate student admission to the university of individual choice” (Renaud, 1991, p. 7). Therefore, one of the IBO’s ongoing tasks has been to provide information to universities to get them to establish explicit recognition policies governing IBDP students. To this end, it has produced numerous publications, brochures, conference presentations, and workshops to help university personnel understand the IBDP curriculum by creating a “common language” (Daly, 2012, p. 8). In North America, the IBO created the College and University Recognition Task Force (CURT) in 2003, whose mandate is to assist North American universities in “their strong desire to aggressively attract IB Diploma candidates to their campus” (IBO, 2014a, n.p.). By establishing close linkages with universities, CURT members aim to help “train recruiters, train admission, educate faculty, support policy development” (IBA Regional Council, 2009, p. 6). Universities are assured that by doing so they will not only simplify their recruitment efforts but will attract the best and brightest students to their institutions (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003).

Of central importance to the IBO in this endeavour has been for the organization itself to obtain a clearer picture of how the IBDP is viewed in relation to other curricula. To this end, the IBO commissioned two studies on IBDP perception in universities, the first in the United Kingdom (2003) and the second in Australia/NZ (2007). Although Canada has been reported to have the largest number of IB schools next to the United States (IBO, 2014b), to date a similar study has not been conducted. The present study aims to replicate the UK and Australia/NZ studies with a view to discovering how the IBDP is perceived in relation to other curricula by admissions officers in Canadian universities.

Theoretical Framework

The wider research project, of which the present study is a part, uses the discourse-historical approach (DHA) developed and used by Ruth Wodak and colleagues (e.g., Wodak, 1999, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; KhosraviNik, Krzyzanowski, & Wodak, 2012; Richardson & Wodak, 2009) to explore the historical, organizational, and political dimensions of IBO discourse. The main aim of the DHA is to work “multimethodically

[i.e., using different approaches]...to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive ‘events’ are embedded” (Wodak, 2001, p. 65). By contextualizing discourse socially, institutionally and historically, the DHA helps to identify “particular *discursive strategies* that serve to present the arguments of an individual or a group either positively or negatively” (Richardson & Wodak, 2009, p. 255). The use of a variety of empirical data, such as texts, websites, conference presentations, policy documents, journal articles, and reports not only help to minimize the risk of bias, but also make visible how different discourses work together to co-construct the image of the IB.

The present study also draws on Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) discussion of institutionalization, which “occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors” (p. 72), in its analysis of the IBDP as a discursive phenomenon. Berger and Luckmann argue that, as human actions are repeated, they develop into patterns, which then come to be perceived as such patterns. Viewed in this way, they come to control the behaviour of the actors and, over time, become institutions: “They cannot be created instantaneously. Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced” (p. 72). This historical dimension then gives institutions an objective reality, as “unalterable and self-evident” (p. 77), distinguishing “institutionalization” from concepts such as “branding” and “marketing,” which tend to occur in the immediate present and are concerned with the production and consumption of goods (see Cambridge, 2002). Further, Berger and Luckmann argue that the relationship between humans and their social product is also dialectical, in the way each interacts and shapes the other. Finally, institutions require “legitimation” (p. 79) through explanations and justifications to the next generation:

These will have to be consistent and comprehensive in terms of the institutional order, if they are to carry conviction to the new generation. The same story, so to speak, must be told to all the children... These legitimations are learned by the new generation during the same process that socializes them into the institutional order. (p. 79)

Together with the DHA, Berger and Luckmann’s concept of institutionalization provides a valuable lens through which to understand how widespread, consistent views of the

IBDP curriculum have been discursively constructed by the IBO through its transmission of the same IBDP story, such that the IBDP has become institutionalized as a superior curriculum in the perceptions of university personnel.

History of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP)

The IBDP was created by the IBO in 1968 as a program of study aimed at “internationally mobile students preparing for university” (IBO, 2013, n.p.), and was developed as a curriculum to be offered in private international schools around the world to serve the needs of “students disadvantaged by having to live and study abroad” (Bagnall, 1994, p. 5). Since these students were often living in parts of the non-Western world, where it was assumed that the local education was either inferior or inaccessible because of language barriers (Hayden, 1998), such international schools served a practical need by providing students with a “home” curriculum, in their own language, recognized by universities in their own countries.

According to Robert Blackburn (1991), the IBDP was thus created to meet the practical needs of international schools, i.e., to provide students with a single acceptable recognized qualification for university entry:

The IB was created as “an international passport to higher education” and it is clearly important that possession of an IB diploma should secure consideration by the university of a student’s choice... It would clearly be intolerable (and unworkable) to offer IB students an excellent international curriculum...at the expense of their university entry ambitions. *In fact, the worldwide recognition of the diploma is essential to the international credibility of the project...*[emphasis added]. (Blackburn, 1991, p. 23)

Over the past decade, however, in addition to its continued expansion among private international schools around the world (e.g., Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012), the IB has also become a competitor curriculum at local (i.e., publicly funded state-run) schools in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Bunnell, 2011a). In conjunction with positioning the IB as a “national” curriculum, the IBO has devoted much

effort to the institutionalization of the IBDP at universities in these countries. A key focus has been to determine how the IBDP is perceived in such institutions.

Prior Research on Perceptions of University Representatives

Given the importance of university admission in the creation of the IBDP, it is notable that the first formal study of how university personnel view this qualification only took place in 2003, in the UK. Based on this, a second study followed in Australia/NZ in 2007. These two studies, both commissioned by the IBO, provided a first look at how the IBDP was viewed by universities in relation to other curricula and whether it was considered suitable preparation for university study. Although both studies stated they were neither evaluating nor validating the IBDP program or actual student performance, they are cited in IBO publications as evidence for IBDP students' university capabilities (e.g., IBO, 2007b). As indicators of the global scope of IBDP research and acceptance, they are also frequently cited by other researchers on the IB (e.g., Tarc & Beatty, 2012; Daly, 2012; Pook, 2009) and served as the basis for two small-scale studies on US college officials' perceptions of the IBDP (Daly, 2012; Tarver, 2010).

The growth of the IB in Canada is well documented (e.g., Bunnell, 2012; Tarc, 2009; Walker, 2005) and aspects of the program in Canadian schools have been researched (e.g., Bagnall, 1994; Chichekian, 2011; Rowell, 1983; Tarc & Beatty, 2012). However, an examination of how the IBDP is viewed by admissions officers in Canadian universities has not been undertaken.

The UK and Australia/NZ Studies

In 2003, the IBO commissioned a survey of perceptions of the IBDP in UK universities, with the stated aims of (1) evaluating the IBDP as a suitable preparation for degree studies in the UK, (2) establishing the IBDP's strengths and weaknesses and the higher education sector's level of enthusiasm for the program, and (3) comparing the IBDP to predominant national qualifications (Jenkins, 2003, p. 7). As the report states, "anecdotal evidence...about the performance of students needed investigation" (p. 13), although it also states that "[t]he project did not set out to measure individual student performance...

[i]t set out to examine the response to the curriculum” (p. 26). UK universities had been accepting the IBDP since the 1970s, but only in an ad hoc way, meaning that “IB enthusiasts spent countless hours in negotiations with university authorities countrywide promoting the new qualification” (p. 13), which had led to growing acceptance of the IBDP, as reflected in universities’ admission requirements.

In the UK survey, questionnaires were distributed to all 225 institutions of higher education in the UK (Jenkins, 2003, p. 7),² sent specifically to the pro-vice-chancellors (senior administrators). One hundred and twenty-two replies from 71 institutions were received, from which 20 (34 respondents) were selected for follow-up interviews. The survey was not anonymous and listed all institutions, names and titles of participants in the final report. Although results showed that “97% were satisfied that DP students were well prepared for undergraduate courses” (p. 27), the study revealed ignorance on the part of university personnel about the IBDP itself. Furthermore, none of the universities included in the interview reports had any formal systems in place to track IBDP student performance, and so were unable to provide information in this regard.

A similar survey was commissioned by the IBO in 2007 for Australia and New Zealand. As with the UK study, a key aim was to determine what university representatives knew about the IBDP and how they viewed it in comparison to other school-leaving qualifications. One important contextual difference from the UK study, however, is that by this time the IBO had established an explicit IB Recognition Policy:

...the IBO encourages universities to develop a Recognition Policy, offers universities secure access to the IBO website, and works with tertiary admissions centres and directly with universities. The secure website contains...an IB recognition policy. The current analysis should be read with this context in mind. (Coates, Rosicka, & MacMahon-Ball, 2007, p. 5)

The Australia/NZ study was designed to replicate and extend the UK study (Coates et al., 2007, p. 7). A total of 644 paper survey forms were mailed out to senior academic and

2 According to Daly (2012), at the time of this study, these were called Selecting institutions, which meant that competition for places was high. There were also Recruiting institutions, which were less competitive. Only Selecting institutions were included in this study based on the assumption that IB students would more likely apply to a Selecting university. “All existing institutions of this type in the UK at the time of the study were included in the sample” (p. 56). However, such a differentiating factor was not mentioned in the published report.

administrative staff: 573 to 40 Australian universities, and 71 to seven New Zealand institutions. A total of 159 usable responses were received: 146 from Australian universities and 13 from New Zealand. Eleven individuals from 11 institutions were selected for follow-up telephone interviews from those who had indicated willingness to be interviewed. Neither institutions nor personnel were identified in the report. While the limitations of this study were made explicit, e.g., that the survey was strictly about the perceptions of university representatives rather than being a validation of the IBDP, the systematic collection of data was seen as “an important move beyond anecdote” (p. 8). As with the UK survey, while the results suggested “a very high level of regard for the IB Diploma” (p. 6), the “study did not examine the actual academic performance of IB students” (p. 8). Furthermore, it also found that

much of what university representatives know about the IB Diploma and IB students is derived from anecdote or personal experience. Respondents frequently noted that their perceptions had been formed by having children or friends’ children pass through the IB, or from knowledge of a student or group of students at their institution. A repeated point raised in the interviews and survey was that universities had little or no systematic information on which to base their perception of the IB. (Coates et al., 2007, p. 17)

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommended that

[t]he IBO should use a multifaceted approach to help university staff learn about the IB Diploma and IB graduates...providing senior university officials working in chancelleries with summary information and newsletters about the IB...and providing central administrative staff with information about IB operations and characteristics. (p. 17)

A key limitation of both the UK and Australia/NZ studies was that many of the respondents had no direct contact with the IBDP or with IB-related issues. According to Coates et al. (2007), “46 per cent of university representatives in Australasia had no contact with IB students in the last five years, or were not aware that they had such contact” (p. 14).

The present study explores, in the contemporary Ontario context, questions similar to those that informed the UK and Australia/NZ studies. It was designed to replicate

and extend those studies to discover whether the pattern of responses would be the same. This study, then, reports the results of a survey similar to those conducted in the UK and Australia/NZ.

Method

This is a mixed method study using a two-phase explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011): a first phase involving the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by a second qualitative phase to help explain the results of the first phase. A mixed method design was necessary because the aim of the study is to provide both a general and a detailed understanding of the issue of Canadian perceptions of the IBDP. In the first phase, the collection of quantitative data was conducted through an online survey. Before submitting the completed survey, participants were asked whether they would be interested in a follow-up interview, with a contact email address provided. The second qualitative phase involved individual interviews with these respondents.

To recruit participants, an invitation to the survey was advertised on the Ontario University Registrars' Association (OURA) listserv due to the length of time required to obtain the Research Ethics Board (REB) clearances from each university necessary for direct recruitment of university personnel. The survey was conducted between January 9 and March 8, 2014, using an online survey tool (FluidSurveys, Chide.it Inc., Ottawa, Canada). Data were exported into Microsoft Excel (Redwood, CA, USA) for validation, analysis, and generation of charts.

Instruments

Phase 1: Online survey. The survey questions from the UK and Australia/NZ surveys were adapted for the Canadian context, and consisted of three main types: check-list, Likert-scale, and open-ended (Brown, 2001). These were grouped into five broad categories: (1) background information of the respondent; (2) general information about university applications; (3) specific information about IBDP applications; (4) comparison of the IBDP to other curricula; and (5) open-ended question and additional comments. A negative response to any of four questions at the start terminated the survey: informed

consent, privacy statement, background information, and application assessment. The substantive questions were programmed to be optional; respondents were not required to provide answers to questions on one page before advancing to the next. The survey was field-tested and revised before it was posted online.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interview questions. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they were interested in a follow-up interview, with the researcher's email address provided. Based on these responses, two one-hour individual interviews were conducted, and recorded with the participants' permission. Interview questions were not provided in advance in order to try and capture the participant's *perceptions*, rather than prepared responses with possible "correct" answers (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Semi-structured questions on aspects of IB admission policy, issues of transfer credit, and general impressions of IB students in relation to others served as a guide and framed the conversation. Recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed for information that would help explain and add depth to the survey responses. Despite the small number of participants, the interviews provided a valuable supplement to the results from the survey.

Participants

A total of 19 usable responses from 8 out of 24 universities (33%) in Ontario (AUCC, 2015) were received from respondents in various positions. While the number of responses was smaller than hoped for, making generalizations problematic, the target population was specific and deliberately chosen, i.e., it was a purposive sample (Vogt, 2007, p. 81). Unlike both the UK and Australia/NZ studies,³ the present study targets admissions officers whose duties include regular evaluation and interpretation of IB documents. To ensure that the sample remained specific, the survey was designed to terminate if respondents answered "No" to the question "Do you assess admissions applications from high school students?" Thus, although the sample size was small compared to both

3 The UK study targeted pro-vice-chancellors (Jenkins, 2003, p. 7) and, according to Coates et al. (2007), the Australia/NZ study "specifically targeted 'senior university representatives.' The views are therefore of people working in decision-making capacities within universities, and may not necessarily be the same as those people who have routine operational involvement with the IB Diploma or other senior secondary qualifications" (p. 8).

previous studies, this limitation has been mitigated by the 100% contact respondents have with IB students, allowing a more reliable picture to emerge.

Of the 19 respondents, 8 (42%) had been in their positions for more than 10 years, 6 (32%) for 5 to 10 years, and 5 (26%) for less than 5 years.

Findings

Survey results were grouped into four categories: (1) background and procedural information; (2) comparison of IBDP to other curricula; (3) open-ended questions and additional comments; and (4) interviews.

1. Background and Procedural Information

Respondents were first asked about the origin of the applications they assessed, to determine bases of comparison of different curricula. All 19 respondents (100%) evaluated applications originating from: their home province, out of their home province but within Canada, the United States, and other international systems. To determine the proportion of IB applications in relation to other types of applications (CEGEP, A-Levels, US high school, other international), respondents were asked to indicate the percentage they evaluated of each type over the previous year according to the following scale: (i) less than 5%; (ii) 5–10%; (iii) 10–15%; (iv) more than 15%; and (v) N/A, for which 19 responses were received (18 responses were received for “other international”) (see Figure 1).

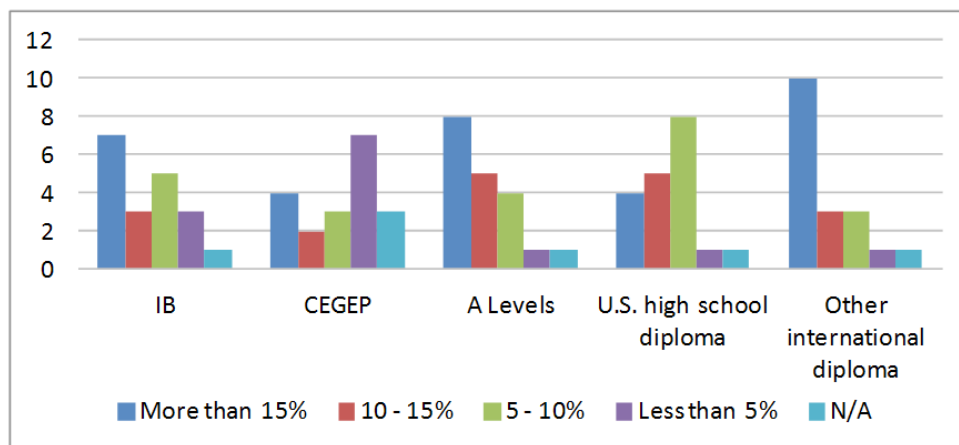


Figure 1. Percentage of applications assessed by origin ($n = 19$).

2. Comparison of the IB to Other Curricula

Nine Likert-scale questions were adapted from the Australia/NZ study (Coates et al., p. 37), deliberately retaining the positive bias evident in that study. The questions asked respondents about specific aspects of the IBDP in relation to their own provincial high school curriculum, other Canadian high school curricula, US high school curricula, A-Levels (UK high school), and other international curricula. Each of the statements required a response ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” or “cannot say.” The responses to these substantive questions showed a high degree of consensus, with minimal variation among admissions officers across universities.

(i) The IB is more challenging than... As shown in Figure 2, the overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) agreed that the IB was a more challenging curriculum than all Canadian high school curricula. None disagreed and only one neither agreed nor disagreed. Almost as many (90%) agreed that the IB was more challenging than US high school curricula, with one respondent neither agreeing nor disagreeing and one respondent unable to say. Again, no respondents disagreed with this statement. However, responses diverged more with respect to A-Levels and other international curricula. One respondent provided no response for either of the latter.

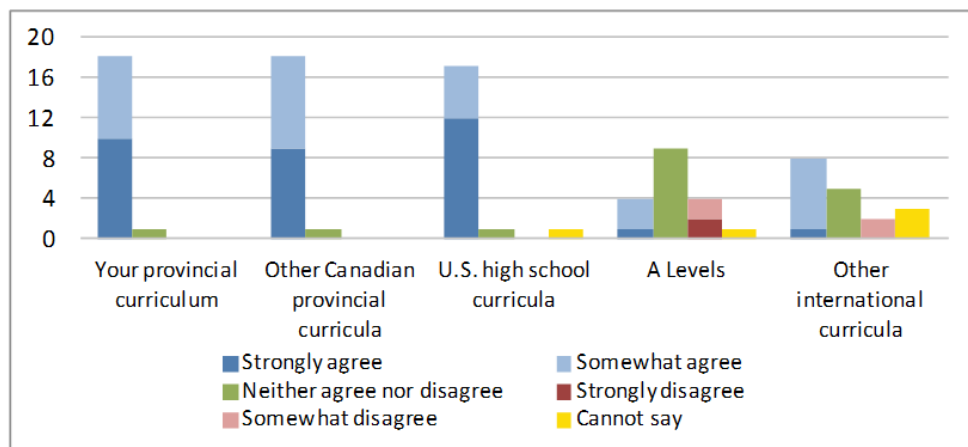


Figure 2. Comparison of challenge ($n = 19$).

(ii) The IB prepares students better for university studies than ... As shown in Figure 3, the overwhelming majority of respondents again (90%) agreed that the IB better

prepares students for university study than either Canadian or US high school curricula. Again, no respondents disagreed with this statement and only two neither agreed nor disagreed. Responses again diverged with respect to A-Levels and other international curricula. One respondent provided no response for A-Levels.

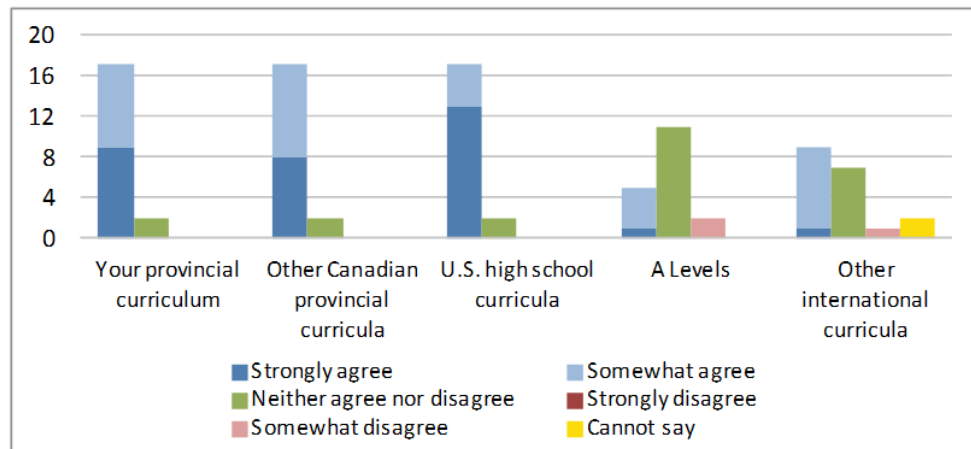


Figure 3. Comparison of preparation for university studies ($n = 19$).

(iii) IB students make an easier transition to university than students who have taken... As shown in Figure 4, more than half of the respondents (53%) agreed that IB students make an easier transition to university than students from Canadian high school curricula, while half (50%) agreed with respect to transitioning from US high school curricula. Only one respondent disagreed, whereas eight (42% for Canada, 45% for the US) neither agreed nor disagreed or could not say. One respondent provided no response for US high school curricula. With respect to A-Levels and other international curricula, the majority of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to say.

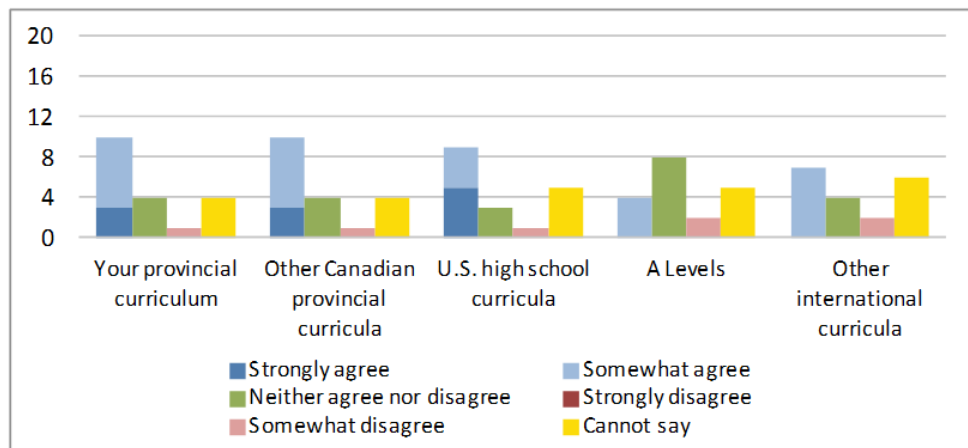


Figure 4. Comparison of transition to university ($n = 19$).

(iv) *IB students are more capable of independent research than students who have taken...* As shown in Figure 5, less than half (44%) of the respondents agreed that IB students are more capable of independent research than students from Canadian or US high school curricula. Only one respondent disagreed and half (50%) neither agreed nor disagreed or could not say. Regarding A-Levels and other international curricula, the majority (72%) neither agreed nor disagreed or were unable to say.

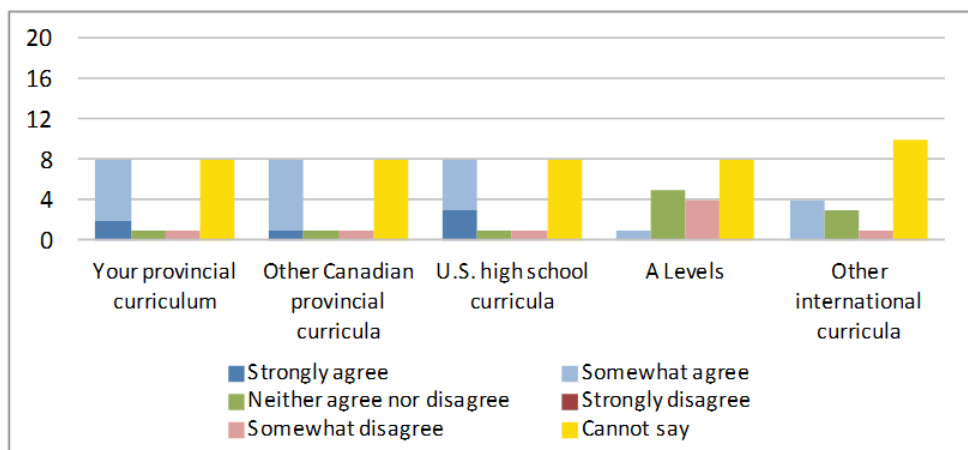


Figure 5. Comparison of independent research capability ($n = 18$).

(v) *IB students have better research skills than students who have taken...* As shown in Figure 6, again, less than half of the respondents agreed that IB students have

better research skills than students from Canadian (39%) or US (33%) high school curricula, with half (50%) unable to say. Regarding A-Levels and other international curricula, the majority (77%) were either unable to say or neither agreed nor disagreed. One respondent provided no response for other international curricula.

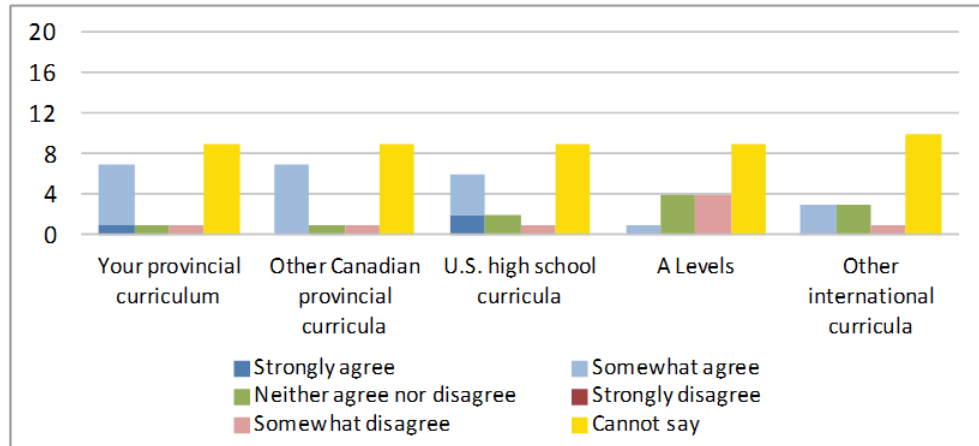


Figure 6. Comparison of research skills ($n = 18$).

(vi) IB students have better written communication skills than students who have taken... As shown in Figure 7, less than half of the respondents agreed that IB students have better written communication skills than students from either Canadian (39%) or US (45%) high school curricula. Only one respondent disagreed with respect to Canadian curricula, and none disagreed with respect to US high school curricula. In all three, however, more than half (56%) neither agreed nor disagreed, or were unable to say. Regarding A-Levels and other international curricula, the majority (72–78%) were either unable to say or neither agreed nor disagreed.

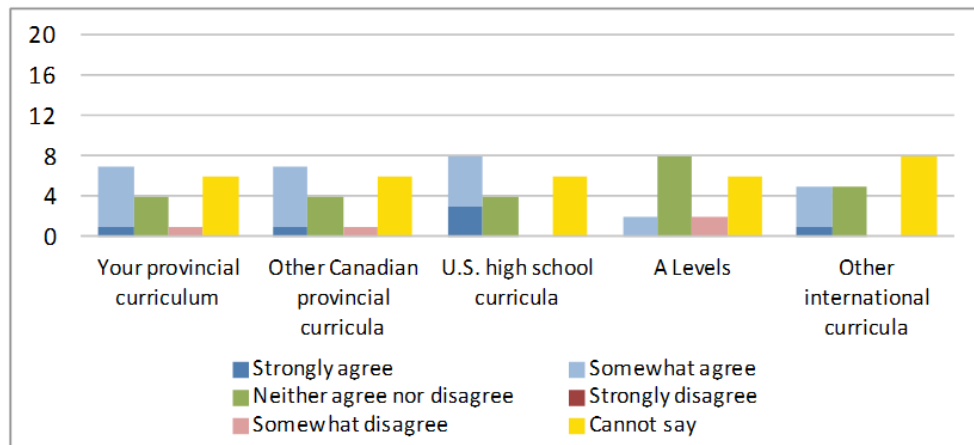


Figure 7. Comparison of written communication skills ($n = 18$).

(vii) IB students have better oral communication skills than students who have taken... As shown in Figure 8, the majority (72–78%) of respondents either could not say or neither agreed nor disagreed that IB students have better oral communication skills than students from Canadian or US high school curricula. Only two respondents disagreed with respect to Canadian curricula. Regarding A-Levels and other international curricula, the majority (83%) were either unable to say or neither agreed nor disagreed.

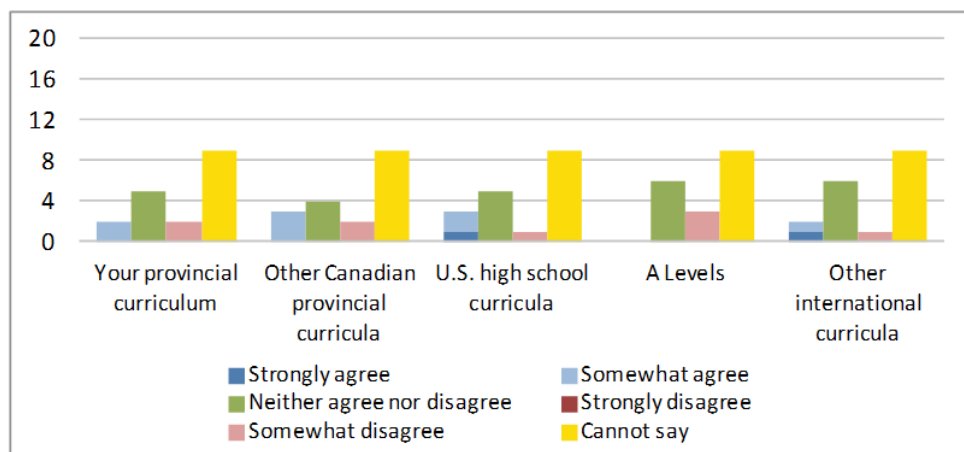


Figure 8. Comparison of oral communication skills ($n = 18$).

(viii) IB students are more active in university life than students who have taken... As shown in Figure 9, the overwhelming majority (78%) of respondents could

not say that IB students were more active in university life than students from any other curriculum. Only one respondent agreed with respect to Canadian curricula and two with respect to US high school curricula.

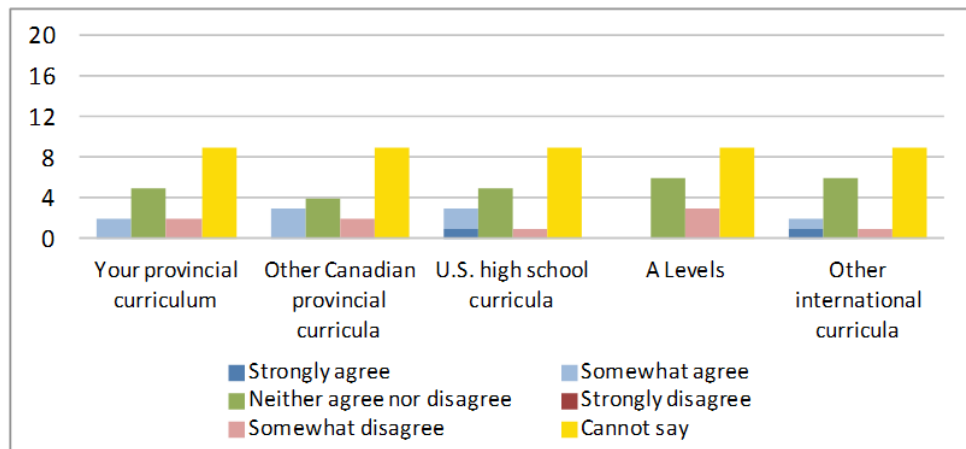


Figure 9. Comparison of activeness in university life ($n = 18$).

(ix) IB students are better problem solvers than students who have taken... As shown in Figure 10, the majority (67%) of respondents could not say that IB students were better problem solvers than students from any other curriculum. Only a small number (17–22%) agreed with respect to Canadian and US high school curricula. One respondent did not provide a response for other international curricula.

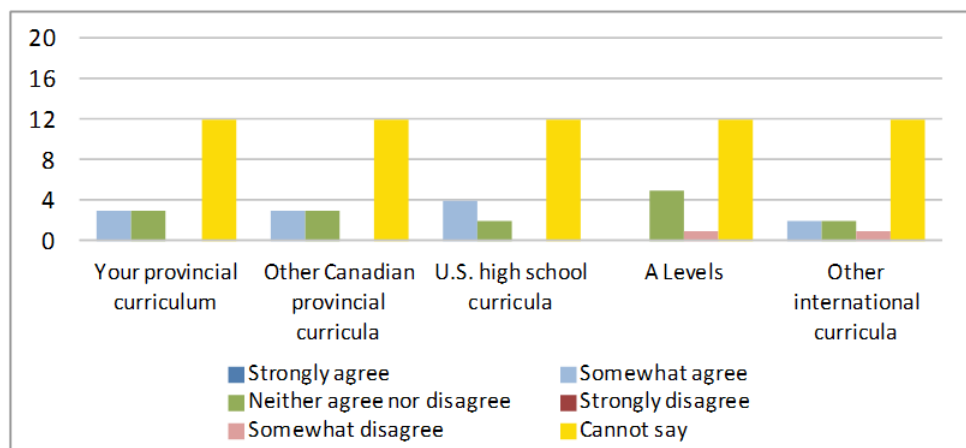


Figure 10. Comparison of problem-solving abilities ($n = 18$).

(x) Overall opinion of IBDP versus Canadian high school. Respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, Canadian students graduating with an IB diploma had more advantages than their peers graduating with provincial certificates. Sixty-seven per cent replied in the affirmative (Figure 11).

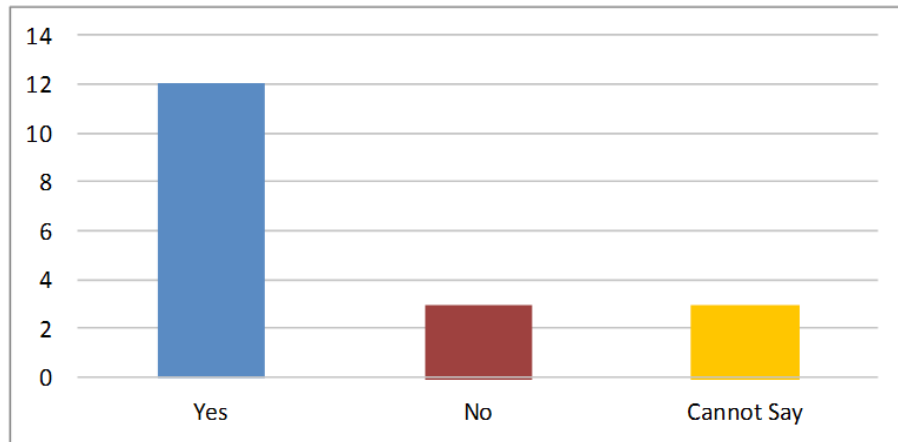


Figure 11. Opinion of IBDP advantage ($n = 18$).

(xi) Sources of information. Respondents were asked to indicate the sources of their information about the IB (see Figure 12). The majority of respondents indicated three common sources: IBO public webpages (94%), internal documents (100%), and external information sessions (78%). Less than half (44%) indicated use of IBO secure webpages. More than half (67%) indicated use of their institution website and half (50%) their institution calendar. No respondents declared any other source of information in the text field provided for this response.

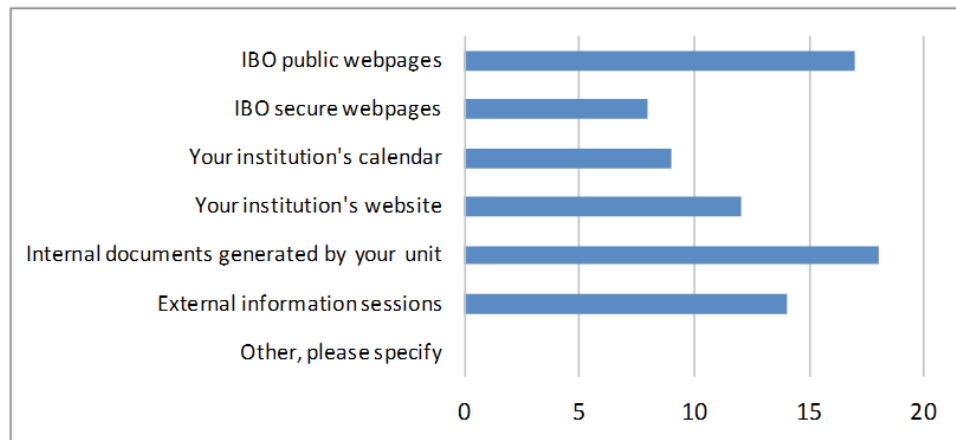


Figure 12. Sources of IB information ($n = 18$).

3. Open-ended Questions and Additional Comments

(i) Open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to provide their overall view of the IB diploma. Responses were coded according to broad themes that emerged. Fifteen responses were submitted, with all but one expressing a very positive view of the IBDP. Nine (60%) noted specifically that the IB prepares students well for university/post-secondary studies. Five (33%) commented positively on the IB system of education as being standardized, available globally, well monitored by the IBO, and therefore providing “realistic grades.” Two (13%) mentioned the transfer credits awarded to IB students and one respondent stated that from an Admission Officer perspective, “the International Baccalaureate is a very straightforward curriculum. It is easy to understand.” One respondent stated that “too much emphasis is put on the possible Advanced Credit aspect of the IB courses, especially by the parents of Canadian IB students. I believe that the IB schools are ‘selling’ the program in the wrong way.”

(ii) Additional comments. At the end of the survey, respondents were provided with an opportunity to comment on the survey as a whole. A total of five comments were received. Of these, four expressed uncertainty about the questions and whether admissions officers were able to answer questions relating to university performance or research and problem-solving skills, since none of these are measured following admission

and therefore respondents would not have the information necessary. One noted that both good teachers and good students could be found in any curriculum. One respondent reported having an impression from the survey that the researcher was very much “sold” on the IB program and that this bias showed.

4. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with two participants provided additional information to supplement the survey data. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded according to broad themes that corroborated survey data and that reflected respondent opinion and professional insight (Yin, 2009, p. 107).

One of the key themes that emerged in the interviews was the rigour of the IB curriculum as compared to other curricula, with IB courses described as emphasizing research, writing and presentation skills in a way that provincial curricula do not. The length of IB courses spanning two years as opposed to other curricula covering only the final year of high school was also mentioned. Participants stated that IB students did more than other students, thereby noting that the IB curriculum better equipped students for university study, and actually covered material equivalent to first year courses, which is why IB students were awarded transfer credits. However, interview participants also qualified their remarks by mentioning that poor students could be found in any system and that being an IB student did not necessarily mean that “that student is a stellar student compared to some other national curriculum.”

When asked to what extent the number of IB applications had increased at their institutions, both participants commented that there had been a noticeable increase. The notion of standardization and the growing familiarity with the IBO in instilling confidence in admission officers was another theme that emerged in the interviews, echoing a response to the open-ended question in the survey (“It is easy to understand”). In terms of university recruitment strategies, the importance of IBO accreditation and its relationship to the Council of International Schools (CIS) was discussed. IB World Schools undergo “a very rigorous accreditation” and then get accredited by CIS, providing a further level of confidence and validation.

The awarding of transfer credits for IBDP courses was also a recurring theme, and was associated with the rigour of the program. This was given as one of the key

advantages for IB students when compared to students from provincial curricula. However, participants also explained that there were no systems in place at their universities to track student performance by curriculum. In terms of communication with IB representatives, the primary source of information was the IBO website, and when necessary, the manager/director of admissions who usually served as the IB liaison person.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore Ontario university admissions officers' perceptions of the IBDP in relation to other high school curricula. As with the UK and Australia/NZ studies, the results show that respondents have a highly positive view of the IBDP as more challenging and preparing students better for university studies than local (i.e., Canadian or US) high school curricula. Although the sample size was much smaller than those in the UK and Australia/NZ studies, the results provide an important first view of perceptions of Canadian university admissions officers regarding the IBDP as a curriculum for university entry. Unlike the earlier studies, in which a large percentage of the sample had little or no contact with IB students, all respondents in this study regularly evaluate IBDP applications for university admission and are familiar with the various components of such evaluation.

What is noticeable is the consistency in the pattern of responses, not only with one another but also when compared to the previous studies. A clear trend is revealed in the survey responses and subsequently confirmed by the interviews: Canadian admissions officers are very positively disposed towards the IBDP, particularly when compared to Canadian provincial and US high school curricula. Yet, this certainty diminishes as questions about the IBDP curriculum become more specific (e.g., whether IBDP students have better writing skills, better research skills, better oral communication skills, etc.), suggesting that, while there appears to be no doubt on the part of the respondents that the IBDP is in fact more challenging and better prepares students for university in comparison to other curricula, most were unable to say how this is evident in specific skill areas, and commented that admissions officers simply could not know such details, as there is no system in place to track student performance by curriculum. This discrepancy between

a unanimous and positive general view combined with an almost equally unanimous uncertainty regarding specifics raises the question as to the basis for the former.

This perception was also found in both the UK and Australia/NZ studies, where the IBDP rated higher than the local (State) curricula. In the UK study, the local curriculum (A-Levels) scored lower in all aspects (breadth, critical thinking, communication skills, self-management, motivation) except depth: “A majority (97%) of respondents were satisfied that the DP prepares students well for degree studies, and 57% felt that it gives them an advantage over A-Level students” (Jenkins, 2003, pp. 22–23). Similarly, the Australia/NZ study asked respondents to rate different curricula according to six criteria: deep learning, broad learning, critical thinking, communication, research, and self management. The discussion of the results stated that “[t]he state certificates and New Zealand certificate tend to rate the lowest” (Coates et al., 2007, p. 27). The study also reported a large number of comments (60 from a total of 88) from respondents stating that they did not have sufficient information to answer the questions (pp. 44–46). Interestingly, in the Australia/NZ study, not only does the “IB Diploma tend to rate highly across all categories” but the “‘A’ levels also tend to rate highly” (p. 27).

This pattern is repeated in the present study: the IBDP is unanimously rated higher than Canadian and US curricula, but variation starts to appear in reference to A-Levels and other international curricula. The majority of respondents were unable to make comparative statements in any of the nine categories with respect to A-Levels and other international curricula. This suggests that a higher regard may be given to those curricula considered to be “international,” as opposed to simply “national,” which is supported by the respondents’ uniform overall view that Canadian and US curricula are less challenging than the IBDP. In her study of “how the IB is constructed for public consumption in Australia,” Doherty (2009) argues that the absence of critique with respect to the IB “casts a shadow on others and intertextually builds an implicit criticism of local curricula... If the IB is seen to ‘own’ the qualities of ‘academic rigour,’ ‘challenge,’ ‘well-roundedness,’ such claims create and promote a perception of their absence in other curricula” (pp. 12–13).

Another important pattern in the present study is the consistency in sources of information about the IB. Almost all respondents relied heavily on information produced by the IBO (94%) and all relied on internal documents generated by their departments (100%). A large number (78%) also obtained information from workshops and training

sessions. Over the past decade, IBO representatives have given a number of information workshops at both national and regional association conferences (e.g., Association of Registrars of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010; Ontario University Registrars' Association, 2013). At the OURA 2015 conference in Toronto, the first scheduled information session for admissions personnel was a presentation on the IBDP as “international education for the 21st century” (OURA, 2015). The IBO has also produced publications aimed at higher education staff, such as *The IB Diploma Programme: A Guide for Universities and Colleges*. This publication, intended to assist university personnel in their evaluation of IBDP documents and encourage the formulation of recognition policies, also includes a section called “Admissions officers around the world use some of the following assumptions about IB diploma graduates to assist them in the admissions process,” and provides descriptors for ten such “assumptions” (IBO, 2007b, p. 7). For example, the “Academic strength of curriculum” criterion states, “An admissions officer can be assured of the candidate’s strong preparation in a cohesive and broad-based academic curriculum...” (p. 7). These assumptions were further modified and codified as 13 admission criteria in a 2008 publication authored by the IBO’s College and University Recognition Task Force (IBO, 2008).

To further assist post-secondary institutions in Canada, in 2010, the IBO published a template entitled *Setting an IB Policy that Works for Your Institution and Your Students in Canada*. This document provides “suggested wording” for the formulation of IB policies governing admission, grades, English proficiency requirements, transfer credits, and scholarships, and even provides appropriate boiler-plate texts where the institution can simply insert its own name (see Figure 13).

Policy components	Suggested wording
I. Admissions statement	
IB students need to know that your institution and its faculty understand what the IB qualifications mean and that you seek and value what these students can bring to your campus. A statement on your admissions website is a good place to start.	<i>[Your university] values the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme and its engaging and challenging curriculum that encourages critical thinking, intercultural understanding and respect. We welcome applications from IB students.</i>

Figure 13. IBO policy model for Canadian universities (IBO, 2010).

Each of these publications, designed specifically for the use of university admissions personnel, provides important insight into the communication strategies of the IBO, a message reiterated at national and regional association conferences for admissions personnel, where IBO representatives deliver presentations and workshops. Having identified the information gaps revealed by the UK and Australia/NZ studies, the IBO is actively working to address them.

Although a detailed DHA analysis of the IBDP as a “discursive event” (Wodak, 2001, p. 65) is beyond the scope of this article, the historical evolution of the IBDP revealed in IBO publications, combined with the evidence from the present and previous studies, shows how these various texts work intertextually and interdiscursively such that “qualities/traits/attributes” (p. 75) come to be associated with the name. This helps explain, for example, the frequent occurrence of the words “rigorous” and “challenging” whenever the IBDP is mentioned. The “rigour” of the IBDP recurred frequently in responses to the survey’s open-ended question and in the interviews for the present study. Such repetition is also found in IBO publications, including texts specifically designed to guide admissions officers in their understanding of what an IBDP student “personifies” (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003, p. 56). The reciprocal nature of the relationship between the IBO and university personnel is also made evident in the texts where, for example, results and recommendations from one survey are used to refine existing documents, which then get transmitted as further evidence. Both the UK and Australia/NZ surveys revealed a lack of awareness about the IBDP curriculum amongst university personnel, which led to renewed efforts on the part of the IBO to address this deficiency by providing details on different aspects of the program and how it compares to other curricula. The core components of the IBDP (the Theory of Knowledge [TOK], the Extended Essay [EE], and the Creativity, Action, Service [CAS]) were the least known aspects of the IBDP in both surveys. Since this core is fundamental to the IBDP and is presented as the unique feature that is responsible for the very research and writing skills that IBDP students are supposed to have, the IBO began to emphasize this component in its information guides for universities by providing more description and making explicit the skills acquired as a result of this core and how these skills serve to prepare students for university study.

To better understand the consistent pattern of perceptions of the IBDP, it is also useful to consider Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) concept of institutionalization, i.e., the idea that institutions are socially constructed through repeated actions over time. Berger

and Luckmann describe how routines that arise from humans coexisting become institutions, thereby gaining an objective dimension that is eventually experienced by society as an external reality. Over time, institutional history gets transmitted to subsequent generations through stories, and according to Berger and Luckmann, “the same story... must be told to all the children” (p. 79). Considering the IBDP as an institution, or as a phenomenon in the process of being institutionalized, we can see that in the IBO’s efforts to inform university personnel about the merits of the IBDP through its publications, workshops, and commissioned research studies, the IBDP and the qualities associated with it are being socially constructed. The characteristics attributed to the IBDP by university personnel, e.g., “rigorous,” “challenging,” “better preparation for university study,” “promotes research and writing,” have become institutionalized, so that the IBDP curriculum is perceived, in the absence of any empirical research on student performance, to demonstrate such characteristics. The shift in university admissions policies to favour the IBDP shows this institutionalization in practice. Analyzing documents produced by the IBO, university policy documents, and the survey results, makes visible the repetition of the claims about the IBDP that results in their no longer being perceived merely as claims, but as reality, socially, or in this case, discursively, constructed through the concerted efforts of the IBO to create and transmit this story.

Limitations of the Study

This study is ongoing; the results reported here are preliminary and restricted to Ontario. The sample, while purposive, is limited. Of the 24 Ontario universities listed on the AUCC website (not counting affiliated colleges), only eight (33%) universities responded to the open invitation (with a total of 19 participants). In addition, while the interviews provided valuable supplemental information, the number is small, thereby limiting the qualitative data in this mixed-methods study. Furthermore, the survey questions retained the positive skew of the Australia/NZ survey, from which they were adapted. This bias was remarked on by the Carleton Research Ethics Board (REB) as well as by one of the survey participants. Since the present study was replicating the previous studies, it was important to retain the positive skew in order to see how Canadian university personnel would respond.

Conclusion

This article presented the results of the first phase of an ongoing research project. Based on two previous studies conducted in the UK and Australia/NZ, the study aimed to explore the perceptions of admissions officers in Ontario universities. It was designed to replicate and extend the two previous studies but adapted for the Canadian context. Although the sample was limited in size and regional representation, i.e., the focus for this article is only on Ontario, the purposive aspect of the sample ensured that all those who responded were responsible for evaluating high school applications for admission into university. As such, the trends that emerge from the data provide an important first glimpse into how the IBDP is viewed by Canadian admissions officers. The overwhelming consistency of responses from Ontario universities has made further research involving a much larger sample from across Canada more important.

The results show a remarkable degree of consistency of perceptions across institutions, with a highly positive disposition towards the IBDP, particularly when compared to Canadian provincial and US high school curricula. However, this certainty diminishes as questions about the IBDP curriculum become more specific. This suggests that respondents have little doubt that the IBDP is more challenging and better prepares students for university than other curricula, but when pressed to identify how this manifests itself in specific skill areas, such as better writing and research skills, most respondents were unable to say and commented that admissions officers could not provide such details since there are no systems in place to track student performance by curriculum. One possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that the perception of the IBDP as a rigorous and challenging curriculum that prepares students better for university level studies is closely related to the IBO's efforts to form this view through its "powerful marketing and training presence" (Bunnell, 2011b, p. 71) via national and regional association conferences and workshops.

By employing the DHA and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of institutionalization, the analysis of the different IBO texts combined with the results of the two previous surveys, and the present (small-scale) study helps make visible the intertextual dialectical nature of the IBDP phenomenon. By analyzing the different texts in relation to the historical and social context in which they are embedded, the reciprocal and repetitive actions are made evident.

In sum, there are two key findings to this study: (1) the overwhelming consistency of responses in the absence of any empirical (i.e., not simply anecdotal) evidence, and (2) the current perception of the IBDP curriculum may be attributed to the IBO itself, with its active participation in and promotion of IBDP at conferences and publications aimed at university admissions officers. This provides further evidence that the view of the IBDP as a more challenging curriculum that prepares students better for university is socially and discursively constructed. The uniformity of responses across universities has suggested the value of expanding the research scope to obtain data from a larger sample of universities across Canada.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Janna Fox, Dr. Natasha Artemeva, and Dr. Michael Fitzgerald for their very helpful feedback in the writing of this article. I am very grateful to all the admissions personnel, without whom this study would not be possible. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions in helping to improve this article.

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